

Saint Bernadette Soubirous

*And Our Lady
of Lourdes*

by Anne Eileen Heffernan, FSP
and Mary Elizabeth Tebo, FSP



POOR AND SMALL

A baby's loud wails pierced the quiet of the church that January 9 in 1844. Two-day-old Bernadette Soubirous squirmed and kicked as the cold baptismal water was poured over her head. "All she does is cry," her embarrassed godfather mumbled.

"Nonsense!" snapped Bernadette's aunt and godmother, Bernarde Castérot. "She's a sweet little girl," she insisted, smiling down at the infant who had been named in her honor.

Bernadette's parents, Louise and François Soubirous, would have nine children altogether. Only Bernadette, Toinette, Jean-Marie and Bernard-Pierre would reach adulthood. Four other sons and another daughter died young.

The Soubirous family was poor. For several years they lived in an old mill—the Boly Mill—in the village of Lourdes, France.

One day a heavy knock on the door announced a visitor. Mrs. Soubirous answered it to find the mill's owner standing there. "Is your husband home?" he asked, nervously twisting the beret he held in his hands.

"Yes. Yes, please come in," she invited, and then called, "François! You have a visitor."

"I'm coming," a voice answered from the back room.

The landlord got right to the point. "François, I know you have a big heart, but if you don't collect the debts that people owe you, how can you ever expect to pay your rent?" Again the hat twisted in his hands. "I'm afraid you and your family will have to move."

"But where will we go?" Mr. Soubirous gasped in panic.

"I don't know. I'm sorry," the landlord sighed. "All I know is you can't stay here any longer."

A few days later, as the family quietly trudged down the dirt road leading from the mill, a voice cried, "Wait!" Mr. and Mrs. Soubirous turned to see André Sajous, Mr. Soubirous' cousin, running after them. "You can come and live at my house," he told them. "It's not much, but at least it will be a roof over your heads."

The "house" turned out to be an old prison. And the Soubirous family would live downstairs, in the darker, dungeon-like room, for a long, dreary year.

The family tried to make the best of their dingy, one-room home. But sometimes Mrs. Soubirous got discouraged. "I try to make things more comfortable," she tearfully protested one day, "but how much can I do with just three beds and a chair?"

"Dry your tears now, Louise," her husband comforted. "The good Lord must have something better in mind for us. He must."

The dark and damp environment wasn't a good one, even for a healthy person. But it was especially hard on Bernadette. When she was six, Bernadette had come down with cholera. Later she had also developed asthma and stomach problems. Because of her asthma, which already made breathing a struggle, the room's thick air was often unbearable. At times she would stand by the one barred window, gulping great breaths of the fresh, clean air which blew down from the Pyrenees Mountains. When she was having an especially bad asthma attack, she'd go upstairs to the Sajous' quarters where the window was bigger and let in more of a breeze. At night she couldn't do this without disturbing the family. She spent many sleepless hours lying next to her sister Toinette, suffering as silently as possible and

trying not to cough. For all her life Bernadette would remain very small and frail.

That same asthma kept Bernadette from attending school and catechism classes regularly. Instead, she spent most of her time helping her mother and taking care of her younger brothers. Already fourteen years old, Bernadette was behind many of the younger students at school. A friend of the family tried to teach her catechism, but Bernadette's memory wasn't very good, and she never remembered the answers. One day the woman cried out in exasperation, "Bernadette, you're just ignorant, and you always will be!"

"You're right!" Bernadette replied, giving the woman a hug, "but I know how to say my rosary and I do love the good God with all my heart!"

Bernadette tried not to show how much her "thick-headedness," as she called it, bothered her. She only let herself cry about it when no one else was around.